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*Columbia College Chicago*

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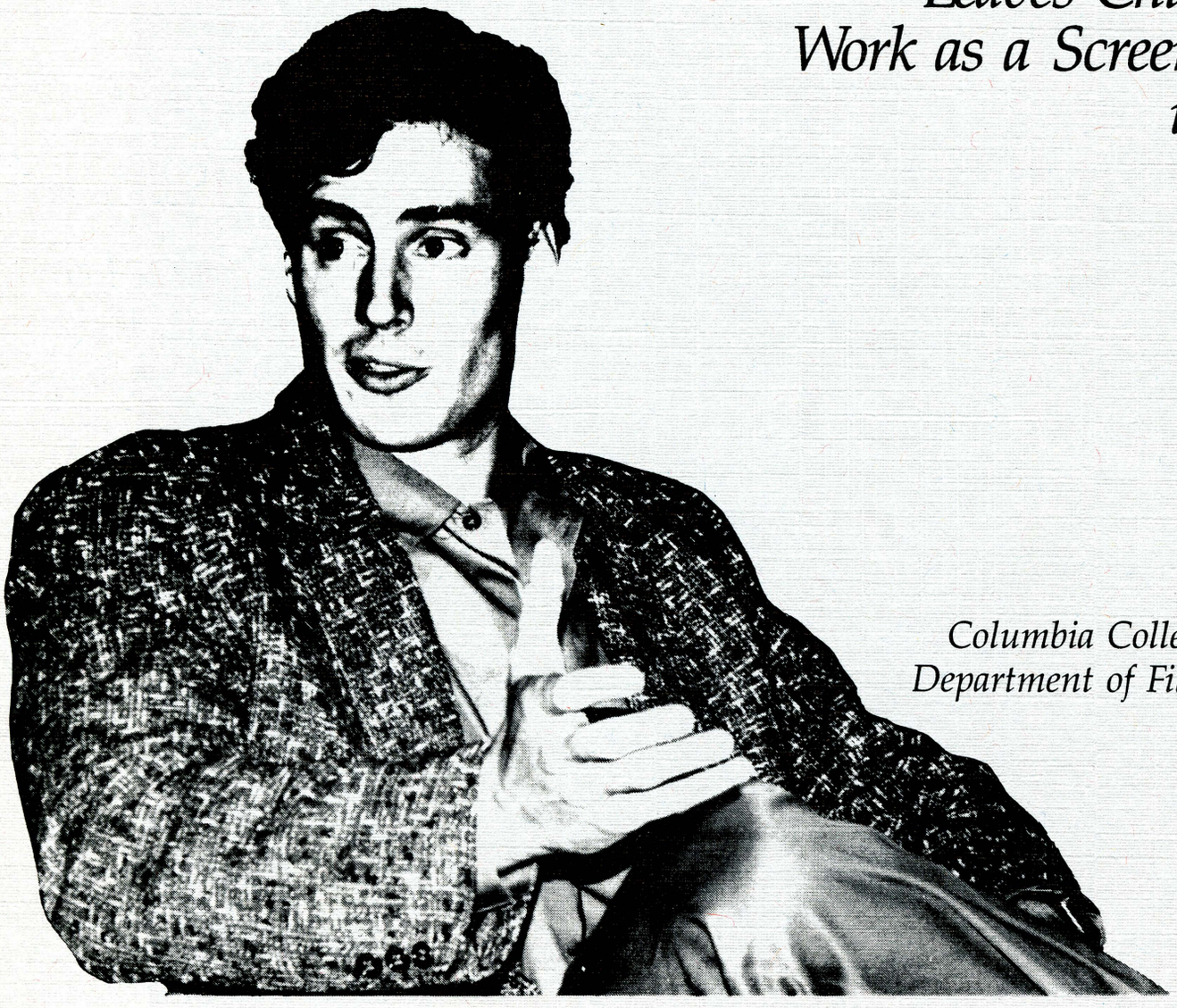

*Columbia College Chicago*
*Department of Film & Video*

This conversation is the first with a Columbia graduate. Charles Robert Carner left Chicago for Los Angeles in 1979, and has been establishing a career as a screenwriter. Our interview carries a special perspective in that Charles began here and is one of us, so to speak.

This is the tenth monograph in a series that began with a conversation 11 years ago with John Cassavetes. Since that time, we've bound up the best of the collected interviews in a book published by the Columbia College Press entitled *Filmmakers in Conversation* which includes interviews with Cassavetes, Joan Tewkesbury, Steve Shagan, Bill Butler, Buck Henry, William Friedkin and Melvin Van Peebles.

Charles met with the film student body last May after screening *Seduced*, a film he wrote for television. Our discussion has been edited for clarity and length and was moderated by Anthony Loeb, chairperson of the Film & Video Department.

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**ANTHONY LOEB:** I'd like you all to welcome Charles Carner. I don't know why I need notes, but I guess I need to be reminded of Charles' prodigious career at Columbia. He graduated in 1978, and you're looking at an "A" student, one of those '60s compulsive types who was the valedictorian of his class and who's now working as a screenwriter in Los Angeles. Charles has written two screenplays that have made it to the screen: *Seduced*, a film for television, and *Gymkata*, which opens here Friday. Talk a little bit about *Gymkata*.

**CHARLES CARNER:** *Gymkata* is really a blend—"gym" for gymnastics and "kata," which is a Japanese word for the forms of offense and defense in the martial arts. This is not a Bergmanesque film, as you can tell. It's all action-adventure with Kurt Thomas playing a gymnast who is assigned by the government to go into a little-known country in the Himalayas and participate in a game, a kind of deadly form of the Olympics. Of course, the fate of the free world hangs in the balance. I call Kurt a human special effect because he's quite amazing and they exploit his physical abilities. His acting abilities will develop. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger, he's not a trained actor, but perhaps one day, he will be.

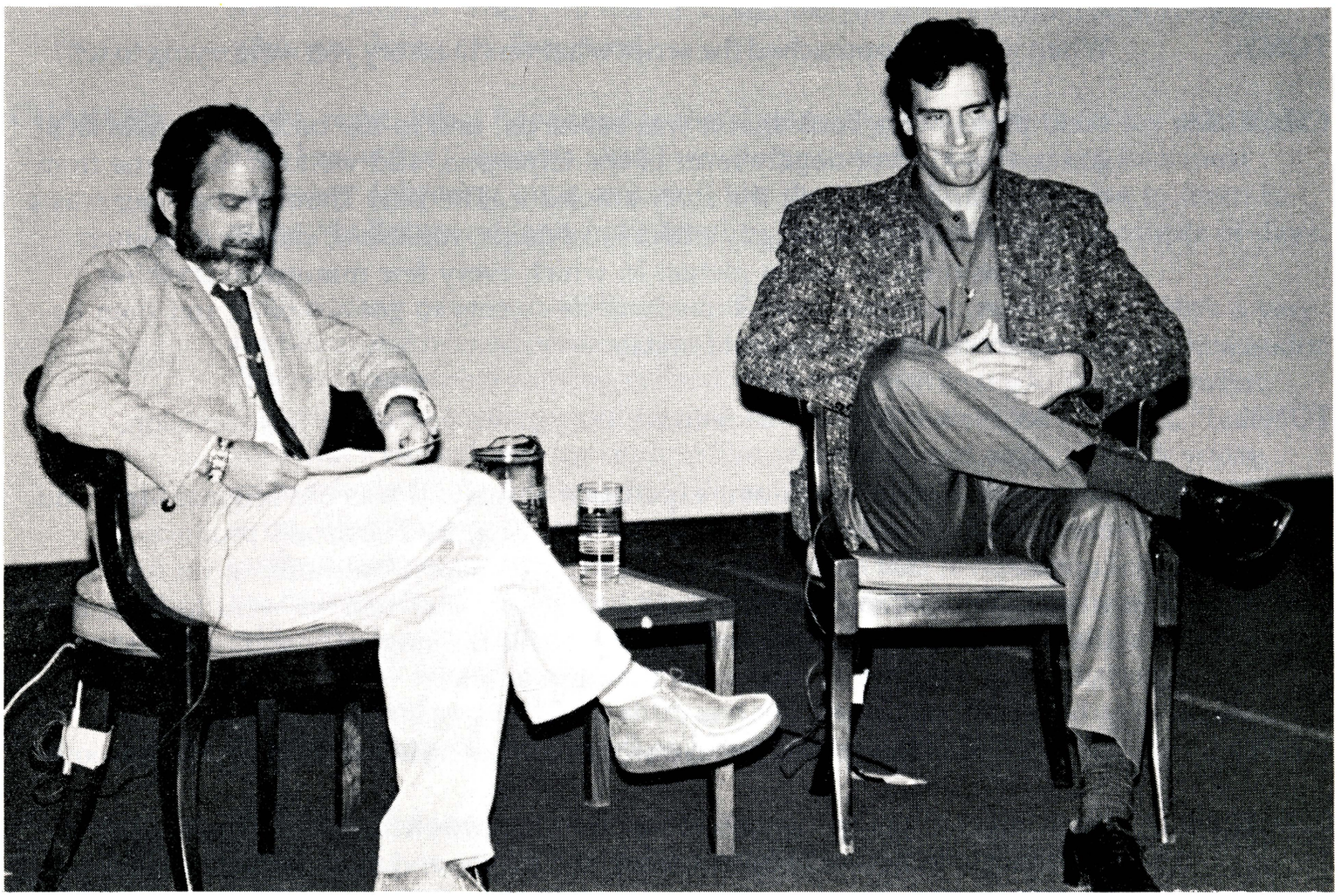
**TONY:** Are you saying this is a kung fu movie?

**CHARLES:** Yeah. They've kind of emphasized that particular side of the story. There's a lot of action, and Kurt does a lot of backflipping and kicking people in the head, that sort of thing.

**TONY:** Who directed it?

**CHARLES:** Robert Clouse is the director. He did a film a few years ago called *Enter the Dragon* which kind of began the whole kung fu, karate thing. And Bruce Lee was in that film. And it kind of surprised a lot of people at the time because it became so successful. And in a way, they may be trying to do a similar thing here, blending gymnastics and martial arts, and all that.

**TONY:** How do you write for this kind of genre? Do you go to see martial arts movies? Are there certain obligatory moments you have to include?



*Tony Loeb and Charles Robert Carner*

**CHARLES:** Well, originally the film was meant to be more of a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* sort of adventure story. It had a lot of humor in it, as well as a lot of action. Maybe I was deluding myself, but I originally didn't see it as a martial arts sort of film. I don't really go to see those movies, and I don't know too much about them, so I wrote it as a kind of adventure story that was tongue in cheek. But in the making of the film, that emphasis of the story was reduced once they had Kurt Thomas and they saw what he could do as an athlete.

**TONY:** When you first approached the script what was the story you were trying to tell?

**CHARLES:** Well, there was a book that it was based on, and in the book, there was this game, this kind of deadly form of the Olympics, and we took the game from the book and then built the story around it. The Kurt Thomas character was a young adventurer sort of guy with a lot of quips, you know, snappy one-liners. And I mean it's an action picture in which every few minutes everything converges, and you don't know how he's going to get out of it, and then he does, like in one of those old serials.

**TONY:** OK, let's talk a little about *Seduced*, the picture you wrote for television.

**CHARLES:** *Seduced* was quite a different experience entirely. It was my original idea, and eventually my agents connected me with Gregory Harrison's production company. At that time, I had worked out the story, but nothing yet had been written. I told Greg the story, and he liked it, and then we went to CBS, and they bought the project. Thereafter, we started the lengthy process of transferring it from an idea into a script and then into a film.

**TONY:** What's it like doing this? I mean what is it like trying to write in Hollywood?

**CHARLES:** It's an interesting experience because there are two elements. One is the process of writing which takes place in a room, and it's you and a typewriter and a piece of paper and what you've got in your gut. That is one thing, and that is one part of the process. And then there's an entirely separate process involving the Hollywood machinery of making a film. It's constructed like a maze, and you're not given a blueprint. You must wander down whatever alleys you come across as you stumble towards the goal of making the film. So, surviving in Hollywood involves a couple of principles. Number one, you must work. Whether you're getting paid or not, whether anybody cares or not, you must sit down at the typewriter and do it. And the second thing is finding out about the process by which films are made, and it's enough to drive you right up a tree, you know?

**TONY:** Please talk a little about the maze that you seem to have penetrated. You started

here in Chicago. When you were at Columbia you got connected with Tony Bill who was doing *My Bodyguard*.

**CHARLES:** Right, right. What happened is that I started writing scripts on my own right after I got out of Columbia. And I was doing various jobs. I worked for a meat company delivering meat and stuff like that. And Tony Bill came to town to make *My Bodyguard,* and I got hired to answer the phone for a couple of days.

Unlike many people in Hollywood, Tony is a very accessible man. He's a very confident and relaxed person. I was brought into his hotel suite at the Ambassador East and I remember walking in the door to meet him trying to figure out what I'm going to say to this guy who's won an Academy Award, and he says, "I saw your film." He had seen my student film, *Assassins,* and said, "I think you're quite talented." And I thought, "Wow." You know, "Now what do I do?" And so on. What happened was he invited me to stick around and I ended up working on the casting of the local people that were in the film. Ultimately, Tony invited me to come to Los Angeles to join his script department and read scripts. He said, "Well, come out to Los Angeles, and I'll put you to work for me." And that's exactly what I did. I went home when the filming of *My Bodyguard* concluded and packed all my stuff, and two weeks later I showed up at his door, and lo and behold, he proved as good as his word.

**TONY:** How long did you work for him?

**CHARLES:** About two years.

**TONY:** Full-time?

**CHARLES:** Well, I worked for him part-time. I also worked on a show that Walt Clayton, another former Columbia College student, was production managing called *The Mysteries of the Sea.* And I continued writing. I wrote at night and I wrote on weekends. I camped out at Tony Bill's and used his typewriter. And after I had written four screenplays and he could see that I was serious, he introduced me to an agent, and I started making some headway.

**TONY:** What about *My Bodyguard?* How did you feel about the film?

**CHARLES:** I remember the producer was always rewriting, and Tony would walk on the set in the morning and say, "Well, what are we doing today?," you know? The script was changing constantly, and I wasn't crazy about it, at first. It was nice, but I couldn't really see what the potential was, and on the set, Tony focused completely on the non-actors in the film. And he got the best from them. And then in the editing process in Los Angeles, through his own sensitivity and just plain doggedness, he was able to get a much better film from the material than I think anybody expected. I know it turned out much better than I expected it to be. I had seen a rough cut, and I gave him pages and pages of notes which I figured he would throw in the wastebasket, but which he actually kept and used. And he ended up really making quite a lovely film. I thought it was a charming picture, and it did well and all that with audiences. That experience provided an interesting lesson for me in what tenacity and faith can mean because there were a lot of people around him who said, "Well, Tony, you know." They were ready to jump ship. And Tony just stayed with it. He got the best of the people that worked for him. And he ended up with a good picture.

**TONY:** Why is there so much backbiting in the creative process? The collaboration is so fraught with peril, isn't it?

**CHARLES:** Well, you have a lot of people who are kind of insecure. They invest their egos in their ideas, and they identify themselves with the work. And so if an idea is rejected, they feel rejected. And so it creates tremendous tension. And people's egos are on the line instead of the movie. There's like two separate things. One is the movie, and the other is all the influence of the people involved. And so frequently it can happen that the movie, which is supposed to be the focus of everyone's attention, gets forgotten, and everyone is interested in being the one who has the last word. There is a frustration that everyone feels when their material is changed, or not used, and when they finally get their hand on the throttle, they don't want to cruise, they want to roar, you know. And so it creates a lot of conflict. In the case of *My Bodyguard* and Tony Bill, although it was his first film as a director, he seemed ready, very relaxed and in control. I mean he

won an Oscar for *The Sting* as a producer, but directing is a different thing. Whatever his worries were, he was able to keep them separate from the process so that he was able to get the best out of those around him. It was an important lesson for me.

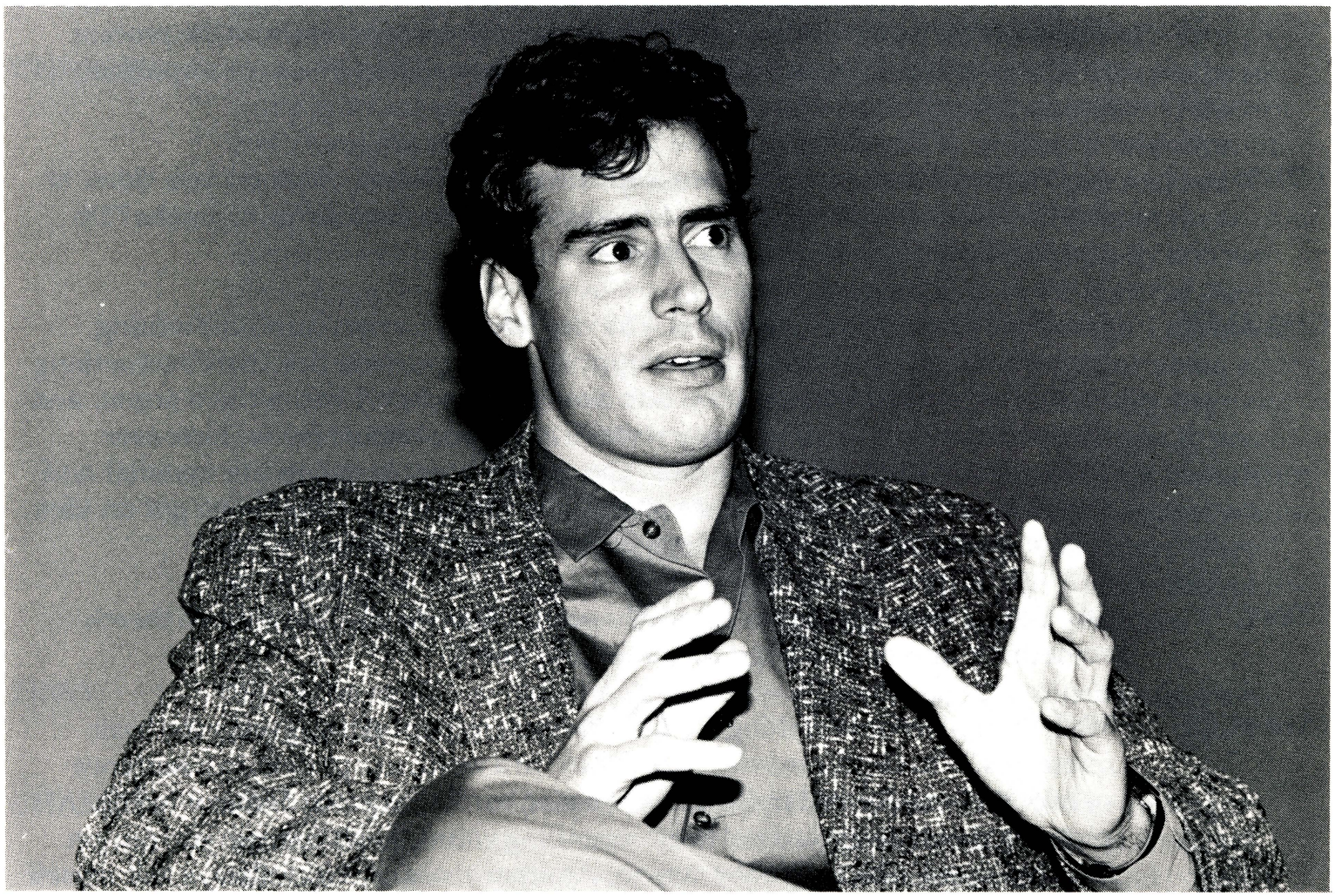
**TONY:** As a writer, when you sit down and the page is blank, what do you think of first? What kind of methodology do you use? Do you think about character? Do you think plot? How do you proceed?

**CHARLES:** Everybody has their own method. The way I do it is I write. I just start writing. I don't look back. I don't care how crappy it is. I just write so that there's something on the page. And I don't show it to anybody. In fact, I will write a scene, and then at the end of the scene I may write "This is the shittiest scene I have ever written" and leave it in the notes, you know. I just generate the material and then look at it and see what it's about, see where it's going. If I've got an idea, if it's a character, then that's the first thing that I'll follow.

**TONY:** OK. So you write the scene. You do the scene. How do you know when there's something fine on the page or something good?

**CHARLES:** Well, there's a couple of things. One is that you must begin by asking the basic questions. What is this movie really about? In a word, in a phrase, in a sentence or two. What really am I trying to do? That's first. You've got to decide what the picture's about, and you must keep reminding yourself of it because you can get lost in a scene and forget the movie. Another thing is that I always ask myself who is the character and what's his problem or what does he want? Where is he going? And so you think about that. You think about the ending of the movie. I frequently think about where it is going to end up. And then sometimes I backtrack. Sometimes I know where I'd like to start, and I have an idea where I'll end up and then I begin to work forward. For me, it centers on character. Who the movie is about has much to do with how it grows.

**TONY:** Who are some of the characters you've responded to—movies that you've liked?



**CHARLES:** Well, the reason I'm in the movie business at all is because of *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola. When I saw that in high school I was amazed. I just kept going back to see it. The world that was created, the character that Brando played, and, of course, the character that Pacino played, the inheritor, the heir to the throne, all of it moved me. I just kept being drawn back into it and ultimately began to see, you know, that it was something that I would like to be able to do.

**TONY:** What drew you back? What are the values in the film for you?

**CHARLES:** Well, it created a complex world in which people respond to their own system of values. They were murderers and thieves, as well as being family men. And so it made you, at least it made me, face in myself questions about the law and morality and who's the good guy, you know? I mean, you have to say on one level that Don Corleone had values. He took care of his family. He took care of his friends. On another level, he was an evil monster. So it got you into complexities, ambiguities. And also the entire world it created was not of my own experience. It created a special cosmos that you could feel—the emotions, the music, the mood, the environment. For me, it was a complete experience as a movie.

**TONY:** It certainly had magnitude, didn't it?

**CHARLES:** Tremendous.

**TONY:** Give us a sense of your own upbringing. You were brought up in Chicago.

**CHARLES:** Right. I grew up on the south side, in Morgan Park. My dad ran a newspaper for a while, but that was before I was born. He was working for The American Library Association when I was a little kid growing up. And my mom worked part-time at a bank. And then, you know, my parents got divorced. My mom remarried. Stuff like that. It was interesting because I was raised in a Protestant home. My dad was a Protestant, and my mom was Catholic, but we were raised as Protestant kids, and then when my mom remarried, she married a Catholic, and so we had a sense of two different worlds. My stepdad worked for the city.

And so as I was getting older and starting to think about just what my own interests were, I began to get a look at the whole political makeup of the city and how that world worked, which ultimately became important to me.

**TONY:** How important is behavior, visual suggestion, in the construction of a scene as opposed to what is spoken?

**CHARLES:** It's the whole movie.

**TONY:** Really!

**CHARLES:** I mean, to me an ideal scene doesn't have any dialogue. We were talking earlier about the film *Witness* which survives on its texture and its subtext. If you have to have dialogue, the best dialogue may seem to have nothing to do with the scene, per se. They're talking about the weather or the fact that they can't get the door to close, but there is an undertone, an implication. What is really wrong is that their marriage isn't going right and they are talking about it by talking about something else, and it's an interesting scene because you've got more than one level working. There's subtext. So, behavior in a script is essential.

**TONY:** Let's talk a little about *Witness*. What was especially interesting to you about the film?

**CHARLES:** I thought it was really about the juxtaposition of two worlds. They took this tough policeman from an urban setting and thrust him into an Amish environment; and it was interesting, too, because he was a man of very strong moral convictions of his own, and so he wasn't wasted or something like that. There was a lot of good drama in there. I mean one scene in particular which I thought was tremendous involves the little kid who is trying to identify the Black guy who committed the murder, and he's looking at mug shots, and they have him look at subjects, and he doesn't know anything. And they're in the police station, and the kid just kind of wanders over to the civic awards display, and the picture of the killer is there as some standup guy, and the kid just points his finger.

That was a wonderful, lovely, visual moment. He just pointed his finger and you knew.

**TONY:** Yeah, it's true, and he seemed so out of place in that world, so fragile. Let's get back to reality for a moment. How do you get an agent?

**CHARLES:** How do you get an agent?

**TONY:** Yeah.

**CHARLES:** The way you get an agent is you get to write a big picture for a studio. But how do you get to write a big picture for a studio? Well, your agent calls.

**TONY:** Uh, huh. Who's on first?

**CHARLES:** On the face of it, it's a Catch-22. Scientifically speaking, a bumblebee can't fly, and then, of course, a bumblebee's flying through the room. You can't get an agent without getting a job, and you can't get a job without an agent. In my case, what happened is that I wrote a bunch of scripts.

**TONY:** How many scripts?

**CHARLES:** I wrote four feature-length screenplays on my own.

**TONY:** On speculation.

**CHARLES:** Right.

**TONY:** Nobody asking you to.

**CHARLES:** Right. I wrote on a wide variety of topics. I just wrote on what I was interested in. And I mean it wasn't particularly calculated or anything like that. I didn't say, "Hey, what's selling this week. OK, I'll write that." I just wrote what I was interested in. And, you know, the films haven't been produced, which tells you something. But what happened is that they were interesting scripts, and Tony Bill read them, and he introduced me to the guy who eventually came to represent me. He, Tony, saw that I was serious, that I was devoting time and nobody was paying me. I was spending my weekends, my nights working, you know. He gave them to the agent to read, and the agent liked them and met me and decided to represent me. I mean, I think the way you get an agent is the way you do anything in the movie business. If you want to do it, then you do it. You find whatever way there is to do it. You do the work on your own. And unless you're, you know, a one-legged high jumper who's really suited for something else, you'll find a way. Eventually, there'll be a crack in the wall somewhere, and

you'll slip in.

**TONY:** Your idea was that someone would respond if they read something you wrote that possessed charm and complexity.

**CHARLES:** Right. They found something in those scripts that they felt was of value, and so they took a chance on me, which is what it comes down to.

**TONY:** What was your experience like at Columbia College? You were at Columbia how many years.?

**CHARLES:** I was here for three years.

**TONY:** What kind of meaning does Columbia have now, in retrospect?

**CHARLES:** Well, I can honestly say after having been in contact with the people who've attended the film schools in Southern California that I wouldn't trade my experience at Columbia for any other film school or college environment. You must know that this is an excellent place, and I felt that I got a great deal of valuable learning and education here. In Los Angeles, the schools are huge and, while they are connected to the movie business (which is nice because you get a steady flow of people coming to the school and talking), they also create a machine environment in which everybody is competitive—trying to figure out how they can be the biggest asshole and screw this guy and step over his corpse. They start to play Hollywood too early. The emphasis is misplaced, and a number of people who have come out of those environments in the '70s have made films that are technically proficient, but their films are often devoid of spirit or meaning. They're just exercises in mechanics. And, you know, I don't think that's what it's about. And Columbia provides a nice balance because, while it's in a major city, it is not so caught up in the Hollywood thing that the essential spirit of discovery and creation is lost. I was able to grow here by exposing my ideas to the input of other people. You're going to get plenty of knocks when you get out there if you want to try to make movies. There are always plenty of people trying to knock you down, and you really need to get your foundation, to practice,

so to speak, in a protected environment.

**TONY:** You made one serious film, *Assassins*. That was your senior project.

**CHARLES:** Right.

**TONY:** And you made two or three other smaller pieces before that.

**CHARLES:** Right. I made four altogether. One was silent. Then I made three sound films of which *Assassins* was the final one, and that one turned out pretty well. The other ones were OK, too.

**TONY:** So when you left, you were in a sense a beginning filmmaker.

**CHARLES:** Absolutely!

**TONY:** And now you've centered on screenwriting. Is that where you want to end or do you want to try to get back to directing?

**CHARLES:** I have always thought of myself as a director, and I started out by making films at Columbia, and eventually that's my intention, to direct movies in Los Angeles. Writing is a step toward that end. But an interesting thing has happened to me as I've been writing professionally. I have gained a great deal of respect for the process of writing and for the screenwriter. You cannot make a good film without a good screenplay. Of course, we all know you can make a terrible film from a good script, you know, if it's in the wrong hands.

**TONY:** But you can't make a good film from a bad script.

**CHARLES:** I mean maybe it's been done, but in my experience, in my opinion, it begins with the foundation. And a well-written screenplay contains all of the layers that will then be brought out in a finished film. All the seeds will be there, and then the film becomes the plant growing. I mean, ultimately, what I would like to be able to do is to direct my own screenplay.

**TONY:** What's the life like out there? People tend to see it as a place where you can get lost.

**CHARLES:** Well, my experience is probably going to be different from the experience a lot of people have had because I just went out there and got in the saddle and started working. A lot of people, you know, sit out by the pool or go to the beach and all that. I don't do that. The problem with Los Angeles is that you're in an environment in which every day seems essentially the same as the day before. Basically, the days run together. It starts out kind of hazy in the morning because it's a bit foggy. Then the fog burns off and the sun comes out. And then it gets dark, you know. And then the next day it's the same. And what happens is that the community takes on some of the attributes of its climate, and so there's a sense of "I'll do it tomorrow." And so, for example, the work week in Hollywood is one day. It's Wednesday. Monday everybody is getting back from the weekend, so they're not answering their calls. Tuesday they're looking at all the phone calls that have come in on Monday. Wednesday they do business. Thursday they're thinking about where they're going to go for the weekend. And Friday they leave. So, especially for a writer, you must have your own engine. You must turn it on and make it hum because nobody's going to do it for you. And Hollywood is a very interesting place because on the one hand it is tremendously competitive, as it must be, because there's only a few slots, but on the other hand, the competition is not always visible.

**TONY:** Are you talking about duplicity?

**CHARLES:** Yeah. If you grew up in Chicago and you are in a disagreement with somebody you say, "Hey, motherfucker," and that's it. In Hollywood, the guy'll come up to you and say, "Hi, how you doin'? Terrific!" And then when you walk away, you think, "Hey, what's this in my back? Oh, it's a knife." So you must have your own values. You must be able to find people who share your approach, and that way the miasma won't overwhelm you. I mean people get upset because their phone calls don't get returned. Well, it's insulting, you know, if you call somebody and he doesn't call you back. But rather than worry about that, if somebody doesn't return my phone call, I'll call them five more times. I don't care. You know, everybody's going, "Well, I'm not going to call him back. He

has to call me." Well, OK, fine. Meanwhile, the phone doesn't ring. So what are you going to do? If it's me, I call the guy. I don't care. I don't want to worry about the fact the guy's not calling me. And finally I'll get the jerk on the phone.

**TONY:** "Hi, how are ya?"

**CHARLES:** Yeah, exactly. "I've been meanin' to call you back, but I've been swamped."

**TONY:** It must feel like culture shock to come back to Chicago.

**CHARLES:** It's great to come back and feel the energy, you know, to feel the fact that things are moving, things are happening, people are moving along. See, in Los Angeles, it's a place in which a lot is hidden. The general surface is very placid, very cool. We're at the beach. We're playing frisbee. But, in fact, there is an undercurrent. Stuff is happening, but you don't always see it.

**TONY:** And there's no center.

**CHARLES:** No.

**TONY:** It's a long runway of houses, a gathering of housing tracts.

**CHARLES:** But when you come back to Chicago, the energy is here. It's visible, it's palpable. And it's nice. I mean the thing that Los Angeles has, of course, which is essential, is that it's the center of the movie business, and there's tremendous energy within that community that you can find. There are ideas. People have opinions. They're up on films. So the community can be energizing from that standpoint. It's just that the surface is just so laid back.

**TONY:** How can you tell if you can work with someone?

**CHARLES:** Well, if they're from the south side of Chicago . . . No, no. You find out. I mean you talk to them to try to see what their interests are and what their methods are. But you really don't know until you get into it whether they're going to fold up and take a walk or whether they're going to hang in there. A case in point is a vice-president at Orion named Barbara Boyle whom I approached as you approach every executive. She's a very intelligent, terrific woman with a lot of very good ideas. But we went to New York to work on a project, and we had a meeting that lasted until four in the morning, and she was there every minute. She was pumping out the ideas. They've got 50 projects at Orion. But she was there working all the way. And so I was tremendously impressed. And I would never have known that she was committed if we didn't get into a situation where we were brainstorming and just kept going. I had no inkling that she would put out that kind of effort.

**TONY:** You're talking about something that's very precious, I think, and that's discipline and tenacity. How do you teach that? How do you prepare people to give their lives over? I mean really there's something inhumane about making a film. The demands are enormous.

**CHARLES:** To make even a bad film requires a tremendous effort because you think you're making a good film. There's a will to believe. You don't know how a picture's going to turn out, and unless you give it everything you've got, you can never be sure that you've given it everything you've got. And you can break your neck and then end up with a stinker. And, on the other hand, you can be helping to make a wonderful film and not know it at the time. The commitment can never be conditional. So, you've got to really love movies. They must have an impact on your life which is greater than you can say. I mean for me it was *The Godfather.* I mean I didn't wake up one day and say, you know, "I've been touched by God." But as time went on, I could see that film was it. And that's how it has to be. You've got to be ready to commit everything you've got and a lot of things you don't know if you've got and you won't know until you get to the eleventh hour and you are tested, so to speak.

**TONY:** Why do you think you want to make movies?

**CHARLES:** Well, it's a number of things. I think that I have something to say that maybe other people ought to hear. I guess what it comes down to is, I would like to be able to do for other people what *The Godfather* did for me. You see? I would like to help other people into another world for a couple of hours—into a fantasy place where they are really no longer a Charles Carner from the south side, but you know, they're sharing a new persona with Brando or whomever. That's what it is. That happened to me. I'd like to be able to give it back.

**TONY:** Let's have some questions.

**QUESTION:** Can one stay in Chicago and make a go of it?

**CHARLES:** I can only speak from my own experience. I did what I felt I could do while I

was in Chicago, but I knew that I had to go to Los Angeles because that is where the feature film industry is. There are other places, but to be realistic, they're like locations. There's only one place, and that's Los Angeles. There's just no way around it.

**TONY:** New York, possibly.

**CHARLES:** No.

**TONY:** There are movies made in New York.

**CHARLES:** There are some.

**TONY:** Charlie, if you subtract television . . .

**CHARLIE:** Yeah.

**TONY:** There are 10 or 12 movies made a year in New York.

**CHARLIE:** Yeah, there are a lot of films made in New York, and most of the corporations have their head offices in New York, but the studio machinery exists in Los Angeles. And the community is essentially in Los Angeles. I mean the Writers' Guild has 7,000 members. There are 200 in New York and there's 6,000 in L.A. So you see what I mean. We're talking in broad strokes.

**TONY:** What about San Francisco?

**CHARLES:** I mean, I'm in Los Angeles and that's where the community is. George (Lucas) and Francis (Ford Coppola) are in San Francisco and that's great. I mean George can go wherever he wants. He's got a hundred and fifty million dollars. He could go to Utah like Redford. And there is a community in San Francisco, to be sure. There's a few. Sure. But they're exceptions. And to think about these other places is to be sidetracked from the real issue. And the real issue is that if you want to make feature films, at some point you must spend time in Los Angeles. I mean

John Hughes, who's a Chicagoan, has had a very interesting experience. He's maintained his roots in Chicago. He has a place in Chicago. But his deals are made in Los Angeles. He spends a lot of time in Los Angeles. His new film is being shot in Los Angeles.

**TONY:** It's a case of being in touch with people who are doing what you want to do. A lot of people ask me whether they can write here and make a start here, and my feeling is you can't do it because you're outside of the energy that you're competing with and you're trying to become a part of.

**CHARLES:** You can write anywhere. You can write in Maine. You can write in New Hampshire. But, you see, there's a special experience that's available only in L.A. if you want to understand the process. Some guys got their stripes and got their scars there and then left. Maybe George took his bank and went up the coast. He can do it. He's got a giant ranch up there and everything, and he's got a tremendous apparatus that he's created for himself, but he is an exception.

He's such an exception!

**TONY:** A kind of Citizen Kane, actually, with his own Xanadu.

**CHARLES:** If you think about those sorts of exceptions, it can make your process more difficult because you'll miss the point. If you want to make Hollywood movies, then you must go to Hollywood. I mean I have a friend who's a producer, Jason Brett. He's a Chicagoan. He's got the Apollo Theatre here in Chicago, and he started moving into film. A script was written of a play that David Mamet wrote that Jason has the rights to called *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and it went off to Paramount, and it got ground up in the Hollywood machinery and Jason, being in Chicago, knew nothing about it. And he finally realized that in order to be responsible for his material, he had to go out there and see what was going on. And that's really what it comes down to.

**QUESTION:** Do you have a plan for where you'll be five years from now? How long will it take to be a director?

**CHARLES:** You must evaluate yourself as you go. You see, Hollywood has a way of taking timetables and doing a little job on them. There are so many factors that are beyond your control that you must often evaluate yourself and your own progress and not worry about the absolutes as much as the specifics. So, it could happen tomorrow. It might not happen for a long time, you know? If I say I must be a director in six months, and six months from now I'm not a director, well, what am I going to do?

**TONY:** We were talking last night about the perennial "first" film for a director. I thought

you were rather interesting about being cautious about the size and scope of the first project you undertake.

**CHARLES:** Well, it's an interesting thing that's going on. I don't know if it went on before because I can only relate to my own experience. But there's a sense in the film community today of the instant career in which you lay every egg you've got in one basket, and if it drops, then you drop. And it's all over. I'm talking about those meteoric rises and falls which can be a catastrophe. I think that for a first film, a director has got to be really aware of the pressures and of his limitations, and I hope that you ladies don't think that I'm talking just about men, OK? I'm just saying "he" instead of saying "he/she" and all that doo-doo. So, the first-time director must be aware of his limitations and what he's capable of doing. He must have faith in his ability and his overall stuff, and of course, he has to survive the experience. Frequently, you'll see a director who makes a little film his first time out which turns out well, and then he takes on a $40 million blockbuster, and when it goes belly up, he doesn't work for five years. I mean the prime example was Michael Cimino, whose second film as a director was *The Deer Hunter,* and he won every award in the book, and it was a lovely film, a tremendous job. And then, you know, he decided to make "Cleopatra in the West" *(Heaven's Gate),* and $40 million later, he didn't work for four years because he bit off more than he could chew. And it happens quite often becaue somebody comes to you and says, "Here's $20 million." I mean David Lynch is an example.

He made a picture called *The Elephant Man* which was a terrific movie, a tremendous film, and then Dino De Laurentis came to him and said, "I'd like you to make *Dune,*" and $50 million later, where are they? You have to be able to know your limitations, and very few of us do because our egos are enormous and when somebody says, "Here's $50 million," you'll say, "Yeah, I can handle that." And the film community forgets very quickly that you made a good first film. I mean *The Elephant Man* is old news. Everyone says, yeah, so David's gone off to lick his wounds and, you know, try again. I mean he makes very eccentric, personal films. Dino was out of his mind to give him 50 million bucks. You get into manufacturing with that kind of money and you usually miss the point entirely.

**TONY:** What is the disease? It seems like Francis Ford Coppola has got it, too, where you kind of self-destruct on success. For me, *The Cotton Club* was incomprehensible.

**CHARLES:** Francis has made some great films. We already talked about *The Godfather,* and *The Conversation* is good. I don't know. At a certain point, you see, who's going to tell Francis Ford Coppola that he's making a mistake? I mean he just says, "Look over there," and there's nine Oscars on the wall. And who are you? Because there are so many people that are knocking you, that are trying to pull at you, at a certain point, your tendency is to roll over them. And if you work in a vacuum, you can end up with a film that doesn't really work out. It's possibly an explanation for how that can happen, because at a certain point, you don't want to listen to anybody else because you're tired of having people tell you. You had to go through ten years of that, of people saying, "Well, this script is good, but actually it's shit, and you're shit." You know Francis made a lot of stinkers before he made *The Godfather.* He made *Finian's Rainbow* and, you know, he had to live with people saying, "You can't hire Francis Ford Coppola. He's a disaster." And on *The Godfather,* he had terrible trouble. He was fired four times. And so it finally comes out, and it's a great film. At a certain point, Francis says, "I've listened to you guys before."

**TONY:** So you're saying that, in essence, this is a medium that requires a team and requires collaboration, but, at the same time, should nurture a director against the stress.

**CHARLES:** Definitely! I suppose if it's in somebody's mind, if he's got a particular theme that's right out of himself and he knows everything, he can do it by himself. But I've never seen it happen. The problem is that collaborating is painful, and it's awful, and you've got people complaining about your ideas, and you're complaining about their ideas; but, in fact, out of that very process of contact and conflict films grow and become good. And so despite the pain it causes you, you've got to remain open to it, you know? And it's easy for me to say since I sit here with no power and everybody telling me what to do. Twenty years from now or whatever, if I have a bunch of Oscars on my shelf, you know, it may be

just as tough for me to give credence to somebody else's ideas as it might be for Coppola or for Clint Eastwood or any of those guys who are now monoliths. So the key is to remain open to other people's ideas because your ideas aren't always that great. They're not. And somebody who's got 900 terrible ideas may have one brilliant one, and you're a bozo if you don't hear it.

**TONY:** What was the best idea you took from someone else out there.

**CHARLES:** The best idea I took from somebody else?

**TONY:** Yeah.

**CHARLES:** Well, they were all mine, Tony.

**TONY:** Oh!

**CHARLES:** Gee, I wonder. Well, you know, when I was first starting on *Seduced*, I was working on the story and I didn't know what occupation the lead guy should have. I was trying to figure out where to put him so that when he got into this dilemma with this woman who may be guilty of murder, his risk would be at the utmost. I was thinking, "Well, if he was a cop, yeah, that's one thing, but, boy, is that predictable!" And I was thinking, "Well, maybe if it's something totally unrelated and then he gets involved." But I was unsure, and I had a meeting with a friend of mine who is a producer, and he said, you know, "The character should be a prosecutor. He's got to be somebody who will have to put her in jail if push comes to shove," and I said, "You're right." And so, that's the way I went. I think it was the right choice and he helped me make it. The man in the film is compromising his career every time he meets with her, so the stakes are always high. Another choice wouldn't have had the same impact.

**TONY:** How did *Gymkata* come to be a movie?

**CHARLES:** Well, what originally happened is I wrote the script a couple of years ago, and it was set up. We had a director. We had a star. We had a studio. We had all that

good stuff. And we were rewriting the script, you know, to go into production. And then it all fell apart, which frequently happens in Hollywood in various mysterious ways. The money wasn't there or something happened. Somebody else left. The director jumped and took another picture. I licked my wounds, which were considerable, and went on to other things.

**TONY:** For a second, though, tell us again what your script was about. We're running low on time.

**CHARLES:** Well, it was about a guy who was a gymnast. His father was an operative who vanished in this country, and they come to the kid and say, "You're the only one that can help because, you know, your dad trained you" and all that stuff.

**TONY:** Well, so you're talking about a picture that had an emotional basis.

**CHARLES:** Yeah.

**TONY:** And now it's become a much more exploitative one.

**CHARLES:** It's become an action picture entirely. The producers went off and did the picture. They were in Yugoslavia filming while I was in Los Angeles working on other stuff, and I had no idea what to expect. I was completely excluded from the production process, which can happen to a writer. They changed the title. They focused on physical stuff. They did this, they did that. And the picture came back, and I saw it, and I said, "OK, it's not what I intended." But you know, by then, there's nothing you can do anyway. Some things are better. Some things are worse. The film has been made, and if people go see it, then that's nice. I'm very happy that the film was made, and I think Kurt Thomas is a discovery. I mean he's an awesome being. But, you know, the thing of it is that there's always more. I think Lucas said about filmmaking that if you get 75% of what you wanted, you should be happy. And you go to see *Star Wars* and you think, "Hey, that's great. What's he talking about?" But when you're inside, when you're doing it, there always seems to be more. It's one of the frustrations. You always envision and imagine something that may be ephemeral, unreachable. Seldom does the

film measure up to what's in your head.

**TONY:** That brings up the screenwriter's dilemma. When you write on a page, you're writing words, and then somebody comes along, reads the page and puts people into parts, and then it begins to take on another life. So the writer is, by nature, only part of the process.

**CHARLES:** Which is why you want to direct.

**TONY:** It's why you want to direct?

**CHARLES:** Because then the movie may still stink, but, hey, you've stuck it out, and it's yours ultimately.

**TONY:** It may be the ultimate delusion—to write and direct.

**CHARLES:** Maybe.

**TONY:** There have only been a few who've done it successfully.

**CHARLES:** There's a few. Bergman, Woody Allen.

**TONY:** He has a collaborator, Woody Allen.

**CHARLES:** Not on the scripts anymore.

**TONY:** His psychiatrist.

**CHARLES:** Yeah, but, you know, Woody Allen is another one that I always try to throw out of the equation because he is unto himself.

**TONY:** But maybe that can be said for anyone who is really successful.

**QUESTION:** What was your experience with your second film, *Seduced?*

**CHARLES:** Well, the final script ended up quite a bit different from the original. One thing you should be aware of is that in television, you're limited by a time slot. You only have 95 minutes and 30 seconds to make your film. My original script was 128 pages. You figure roughly a page a minute and you know that 30 pages are coming out of that baby no matter what you do. So, that's number one. But another thing that happened in the process is that there were political considerations that I wasn't really privy to that affected the final film. It was originally going to be shot in Chicago. There was a very specific political flavor to the story. And the decision was made to do it in a kind of mythical Hill Street Bluesland where the city isn't named.

**TONY:** There is a figure in the movie who is an absolute representation of Daley's son, Richard. Wouldn't there have been a legal problem if they did it in Chicago?

**CHARLES:** Well, I had friends in the state's attorney's office who helped me research the film, who provided authentic background, and they gave the script to Rich Daley to read. He read the script and he liked it. But that wasn't enough, you know? There were other factors. I mean if anybody's going to object, it's Rich Daley because the thing is really connected to him and his father and that whole thing. But he didn't object. Maybe there were budget problems or maybe they just didn't want it to be shot in Chicago.

**TONY:** What was the budget?

**CHARLES:** It cost $3 million.

**TONY:** Talk for a moment about what kind of money writers make. I mean, what is the Guild minimum and so forth?

**CHARLES:** I'm not sure. When I wrote the first script for *Gymkata*, I wasn't in the Guild. So, you know, I was gleefully exploited. But, I think even when you're in the Guild, your fee can depend on many considerations. It can depend on the origin of the idea. Is it yours or somebody else's? And there are other factors like did you do a treatment *and* the story or were you just brought in to do the script?

Fees really depend on who you are and what you can negotiate. I think that if you write a television film based on your own idea, the minimum is something between $15,000 and $20,000. I'm not sure exactly. If you write a feature film, it's somewhat more, depending on the budget of the film. There are different standards for film and television. It may be interesting for you to know that with *Seduced*, because I had never written for television before, they were reluctant to go with me because I didn't have a track record. When they couldn't lose me because I owned the story, they put me on what is known as a step-deal, where they must pay you a few bucks upfront, although they'd love not to, but they

reserve a series of cutoff points. They reserve the right to let you go, for example, at any point along the line, after story, treatment, screenplay, second draft, etc., all of which are transition points where they may decide to let you go.

**TONY:** My father faced that all his working life as a writer in Hollywood. No matter how many credits he amassed, they always seemed to retain the right not to renew his option. The screenwriter is most vulnerable in that regard.

**CHARLES:** That's true.

**TONY:** So you can be released any time down the line, and usually for a beginning writer, between story and screenplay is treatment. So you can do the story and lay out a treatment, which is a step-by-step outline, and they can pay you off after you have laid out the movie essentially.

**CHARLES:** They can always opt for somebody with more experience or who is better known to the network.

**QUESTION:** Do you have to be in the union to sell a script?

**TONY:** I would like to say that you should not be overly concerned by the union issue because you're allowed to sell a screenplay without affiliation, and once you sell, you're automatically accepted into the Writers' Guild.

**QUESTION:** What about credit? How do they determine whose name goes on the screen?

**CHARLES:** The method of determining credit is a very arcane and interesting process because frequently in the making of films for television or with features, there are many people who get involved in the writing of the script. There can be many writers.

**TONY:** Let me add to that that the credit is determined by the amount of material that you have originated that resides or remains in the film. So if you can go to a hearing and show that the film is based substantially on your material, you'll get credit. If your material is changed substantially, and the film is no longer

based on your work, you may not get credit.

**CHARLES:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Are you saying that you didn't really care about the fact that *Gymkata* was changed so much—that it's kind of like whatever can get done, do it? Whatever you can go and do, start doing it, even if it's on a low level—that later on you may have more control?

**CHARLES:** Well, yeah. It's not that I don't care what has happened. It's just that there's very little at this point I can do. You just take your lumps, you know? I felt floored when the changes were made. Of course you do. They change a line and I want to kick them in the nuts. I mean you can lay on the canvas for several hours staring at the ceiling. Sooner or later, you have to get up, and the sooner you can get up and dust yourself off and get back in there, the better. And it's horrible when they make a change, and what the fuck! "Hey, I thought of that. Why are they changing it?" But you can't let it stop you. It'll give you pause. It'll hurt you. You'll feel that you've really been stepped on. But if you let it stop you, then you're stopped.

**TONY:** And how do you know that a change isn't an addition?

**CHARLES:** Right. That's the other thing as well. Who died and appointed you chief? That's the other thing. So you have to try to be open to it. And in terms of working, well, if you're not working, you're not working, you know? I mean for a long time people would come up to me and say, "Well, what do you do?" And I'd be working for the meat company or something. And I'd say, "Well, I'm a former film student." I mean I wanted to be a writer, and I was writing, but no one was paying me to write, so I'm not a writer yet. I mean it was such a liberating feeling to one day get my tax return and write on it "screenwriter." The form says, "Where did you make your money." And I made it writing. I draw the line for myself because you have to understand that every cabdriver, every bellhop, every doorman, every phone repairman in L.A. says he's a writer. But you're only a writer when you're paid to be a writer.

**QUESTION:** What would you have done without Tony Bill's help?

**CHARLES:** God, I have no idea.

**TONY:** OK, slow down because that's a good question. A lot of people want to work on features. So how did you manage to get a job on *My Bodyguard?*

**CHARLES:** Right. OK. Point one. When I got out of film school at Columbia, there was a team coming in to shoot a television show called *Dummy* with Paul Sorvino and LeVar Burton. Frank Perry was the director. Frank Perry called Roger Ebert and said, "I need a guy to kick around who knows Chicago. I need a go-fer on my film." And I had been a student of Roger's and he suggested me to Frank Perry.

And Frank met me at his hotel and he hired me to work on his film. And on that film I met some production people and when *My Bodyguard* came to town, I was known a little bit. And since I had worked before, they called me to come in and answer the phone for a couple of days for Tony Bill. And then, you know the rest. So you're right, there was that first step. And it all came together because Tony Bill happened to have seen my student film when I sent it out to the American Film Institute one year. He was serving on the board and he saw it, and remembered it. And if he had not come to town and had not hired me and I had not gone to work for him, I really can't say. I would have figured out something else. But I don't know. Sitting from where I sit now, you only see that path as it turned out.

**TONY:** To start with, you should have something to show.

**CHARLES:** Definitely.

**TONY:** Make a film of some merit here.

**CHARLES:** Yes!

**TONY:** And that doesn't mean a Tech I film.

**CHARLES:** They're all asleep.

**TONY:** Thanks for coming, Charles.

**CHARLES:** Yeah, it was great. Thanks for having me. Thank you Columbia. I wish you all luck.

Since our interview, Charles completed the screenplay for *Let's Get Harry*, a Tri-Star film starring Robert Duvall. The film, which was shot on location in Mexico and Aurora, Illinois, is scheduled for release in July.

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